

2006 Trafficking in Persons Report - BELARUS (TIER 2)

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Belarus is primarily a source country for women and children trafficked to Europe, North America, the Middle East, Japan, and South Korea for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Reports of men trafficked for forced labor to Russia increased significantly in 2005. IOM assisted an increased number of Belarusian men and women trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labor over the last year. Traffickers continued to utilize the open border between Russia and Belarus to move victims both eastward and westward.

The Government of Belarus does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so. The government adopted amendments to its criminal code to enhance its anti-trafficking enforcement framework and improve victim protection in 2005. Lack of adequate funding for victim protection, however, hampered the government's ability to deliver consistent assistance to victims and undertake new anti-trafficking responsibilities. The government should provide additional training to officials to raise general awareness and improve victim identification throughout Belarus. The government's inter-agency task force on trafficking should meet more regularly to increase coordination and communication among relevant agencies and NGOs and to streamline its anti-trafficking response.

Prosecution

The Government of Belarus continued to strengthen its law enforcement response to trafficking in 2005. The government increased the maximum penalty for convicted traffickers to 15 years and amended the law to protect trafficking victims from criminal prosecution, but only for victims who cooperated in an investigation and prosecution. During the reporting period, the government stepped up its enforcement efforts by investigating 359 suspected traffickers – a 56 percent increase from the previous year – and securing 173 convictions. Sentences ranged from fines to 15 years in prison. In March 2005, the government convicted four individuals for trafficking more than 30 Belarusian women to Europe and Canada via Ukraine; the prosecutor appealed the case to increase their sentences. Reports of law enforcement and border officials' complicity in trafficking continued in 2005. Although the government reportedly pursued a crack-down on all types of border-related corruption, particularly among customs officials, the government failed to report any efforts to investigate or prosecute acts of corruption.

Protection

In August 2005, the government issued an edict that defines the status of trafficking victims and provides protection and medical care for trafficking victims. However, the government did not provide any specific funding to implement these mandated reintegration and rehabilitation services. The Belarus Government relied primarily on NGOs to provide victim assistance, although the government continued to provide some in-kind logistical support. Law enforcement officials significantly increased the number of victim referrals to NGOs and IOM; a total of 563 victims received reintegration assistance from IOM in 2005.

Prevention

In 2005, the government continued to rely primarily on international organizations to disseminate anti-trafficking information. The Ministry of Interior did, however, help raise public awareness by referring appropriate callers to its general information hotline or to an anti-trafficking NGO hotline. In addition, the government periodically ran anti-trafficking awareness advertisements in state media. High-level public officials spoke out against trafficking and acknowledged the seriousness of the problem in Belarus, helping to raise official awareness at the local level. Through a Presidential decree, the government increased regulation of employment, modeling, and marriage agencies to prevent traffickers from fraudulently recruiting victims in 2005. In addition, the government now requires those seeking work or study abroad to obtain permission from the government. Some outside observers noted that the government's recent anti-trafficking actions might negatively affect Belarus citizens traveling for legitimate purposes.

THE TIERS

TIER 1: Countries whose governments fully comply with the Act's minimum standards. [detailed on p. 288]

TIER 2 : Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the Act's minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.

TIER 2 SPECIAL WATCH LIST: Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the Act's minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards, and:

- a) The absolute number of victims of severe forms of trafficking is very significant or is significantly increasing; or
- b) There is a failure to provide evidence of increasing efforts to combat severe forms of trafficking in persons from the previous year; or
- c) The determination that a country is making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with minimum standards was based on commitments by the country to take additional future steps over the next year.

TIER 3: Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so.